



# LIMINAL CONNECTIONS

FILMPLAN BY LOTTE LOUISE DE JONG

# i. introduction

*“They are frustrated, they have enough to fight about with their wives [...] Here they need a smile, they need a compliment. [...] They come here to feel appreciated, to feel good.”*

Interview with Jessica (Jan 2019)

Contemporary sex-work has changed a lot with the coming of the internet. Suddenly, without the requirement of being physically present, without even leaving your chair, one can connect to another person on the other side of the world (or next door) for sexual pleasure. At this moment webcam websites make a gross 2 billion dollars out of the 5 billion dollar porn industry<sup>1</sup>.

But why do people prefer webcamming over traditional pornography? One thing that is not possible in traditional pornography is making an actual connection with the one performing. With webcamming there is a possibility to talk (either orally or through text-chat), to express your wants and your needs. Webcamming creates a new form of intimacy. It's not a traditional sex job, not a relationship, but rather something within that<sup>2</sup>.

As a webcam model you form intimate connections online, it's not only body-work; it's emotional work.

This experimental docu-fiction will focus on exactly this aspect that is so present within this form of contemporary sex work. Through audio interviews we will hear from the cam-girls how these different and diverse relationships and connections are formed and how intimacy and sexuality is experienced within this digital space.

Through hearing the cam-girls talk about friendship, performance, kinks and



Ewana at Best Studios (feb 2019)

<sup>1</sup> The money generated by cam sites is hundreds of millions of dollars at least, and possibly upwards of \$2 billion annually, according to industry insiders and analysts surveyed by Newsweek.

<sup>2</sup> “They’re defining a new kind of intimacy. It’s not traditional sex work, not a relationship, but something in between.” The Purchase of Intimacy, Viviana Zelizer (2005)



fetishes we learn about what clients look for within these connections. It gives us an insight into the emotional side of the job as well as insight into the (quite diverse) sexual needs a big part of our society deals with.

Ever since I was young, sexuality has fascinated me. It had something to do with the duality of something taboo but at the same time so over-represented in mainstream media and everyday images. The internet played a big role in this. It shaped my understanding of sex and sexuality in many different ways.

## ii. incentive

As a filmmaker and artist my work is closely related to identity and sexuality. More specifically the work I make investigates how we, as a society, view and shape our (sexual) identity through mediated spaces like the world wide web and how these different worlds inform each-other. I look at these spaces through different lenses, to create a distance from its explicit content, to re-contextualise it and to see how bodies are represented and mediated and how sexuality is explored online.



photo taken at Best Studios (feb 2019)

The digital space as a space/place for sexual encounters has been the main focus of my past projects. My interests in this space/place started with webcam sites like chaturbate.com and myfreecams.com. Having talked to many webcam performers it fascinated me that the most important and demanding aspect of their work is the connection between them and the clients.

All of the girls I have interviewed are Romanian webcam models. Most of them work from a webcam studio. The studios provide a safe environment and 'sets'

to work from, colourful rooms set up with lighting, a webcam, a keyboard and a mouse, a screen and a high-speed internet connection. Sometimes these companies also provide hairdressers and make-up artist. Most of these companies are situated in Bulgaria, Romania and Russia.

### iii. relation to larger context

With the introduction of online based sex work, especially those focusing on a live-connection, also comes a possibility to look at sex work in a new way. In traditional feminist theory and research, sex work, and especially prostitution, has invariably seen as inherently exploitative, mostly due to the physical vulnerability that comes with the work. There is a tendency to categorise sex work as a synonym for prostitution, even though contemporary sex work a whole range of activities and forms of labour.



photo taken at Best Studios (feb 2019)

Seeing webcam performers as emotional workers gives us the possibility to move away from the stigmatisation of sex work, giving credence to the experiences and agency to the workers involved, while remaining wary of issues concerning potential exploitation and negative aspects of the work. It is a wide spread misunderstanding that women and men are necessarily trafficked and/or forced into this line of work, especially when located in Eurasia (Henry & Farvid 2017). One of the main reasons that there are so many many webcam studios located in for example, Romania, is because of the economic situation and liberal rules towards the webcam industry and high-speed internet<sup>3</sup>. Webcam models in Romania can make up to 10 times the average wage<sup>4</sup>.

3 <http://business-review.eu/news/romania-has-5th-fastest-internet-speed-in-the-world-176801>  
4 <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-40829230>



It has to be addressed that the emotional labour involved with this line of work can be physically draining and can lead to physical and mental health issues. It's important to note that this is not specific to sex-work – for example counselling and nursing also involves clients benefiting from emotional work. The webcam performers deal with a lot of issues and concerns that is not unique to sex work.

In my film I want to give webcam performers a voice. The webcam models I have talked to deal with a lot of different people with a lot of different problems and a lot of different sexualities. I would like to stress that it's important to listen to these stories.

I think it's extremely important to listen and especially deal with the stories these sex workers tell in the same way we would listen to people with a different profession that involves emotional labour. This way we can talk about the (potential) emotional damage and empower sex workers in the field of webcamming to take care of their mental well-being while staying away from discouraging these forms of labour as they can be very valuable to the people benefiting from them. The woman I have talked to enjoy and take pride in their ability to listen and talk to people in need.

## iv. approach

During my research I have done a lot of audio interviews with different models. What is incredibly valuable is the agility and playfulness in which these models address subjects like sexuality and emotional labour. The interviews used in this film share this sense of lightness and humour. Although in this film I will not shy away from the darker side of the work, this will not have a predominant presence in the film, since I feel this would be unfair to the webcam models, as most of them enjoy their job.

The film will visually have a poetic approach. Visually I want to counterbalance the overly present



Anemarie at Best Studios (feb 2019)

female bodies represented online (and in other mainstream media). Choosing not to see the interviewees as they tell their stories will leave the viewer to imagine these stories, working with their own fantasy, without being distracted by the corporeality of the female web-cam models.

The visual will act as a metaphor, shifting between performing reality and becoming reality. The main images will be shot in a film set, one that is visually present. In the film set different webcam studio rooms will be re-constructed. In these sets different elements of the audio-interviews will appear in the form of objects, like books, shoes, etcetera. These images will sometime morph into 3-d images, to act as a direct 'translation' to resemble the mediation of the screen.



photo taken at Best Studios (feb 2019)

The film will start in the studio, slowly moving into these different rooms. These shots are cut with other metaphorical images like skies and representations of the situations the interview talks about.

The film is divided in three chapters. Typing, Doing and Being. This is a phrase I borrowed from the text *Typing, Doing and Being* by Michael W. Ross (2005). "The internet provides this space, previously unavailable, where a person can type without doing, or do without being. It can be both a fantasy, taken to the point of acting it through with another person, or a behaviour that, through being virtual, is not actually done, and thus the person does not have to face the dissonance or stigma of actually being, or having a spoiled identity (Goffman 1963)"



# v. the film

The film is constructed through fictional images and a documentary audio narrative. The narrative consists of seven voices telling anecdotes about different aspects of webcamming. The images act as a visual metaphor.

The interviews will in part focus on the selling of intimacy as well as how sometimes these intimate relations turn into something more meaningful. We will hear models talk about special relationships they have created with people they meet online; some of them they have been talking to for over 5 years on a regular basis. Frequently these connections turn into a 'real' friendship, one where there is no money transactions involved but one that is based on mutual interests and acknowledgment.

"After knowing the job better, I got to appreciate it. [...] I got to appreciate it because I met some nice people online, that changed my opinion about it. That showed me; it's not only a dirty job, a sexual job. It's also the opportunity, to make a [...] friendship, to open your heart, to share a part of your life, to share your feelings, to share ideas. So this why I got to appreciate it." Interview with Jessica (Jan 2019)

Being a webcam model is much more than performing sexual acts in front of a webcam. They are exploring the fascinating world of the liminal space where sexuality takes place, which gives them interesting, funny and useful insights into our own sexuality and search for connection. The film aims to provide insight in the emotional labour involved with webcamming and will try and reframe the work outside of the marginalised and stigmatised framing of sex-work.



photo taken at Best Studios (feb 2019)

## introduction

In slow motion the camera floats through the backstage area of a film studio. There is film equipment scattered around. In front of the stage there are seats set up, like a theatre show is about to start. On stage we see a bedroom filmset.

“This is part of the job, we are selling illusions. If they want to buy them, it’s not our fault.”



Example of a bed-room filmset

## chapter i: typing

On stage we see the set of a bedroom. Three walls and a very detailed inside. The bedroom looks like a fancy hotel-room.

In typing we will focus mainly on the emotional labour aspect of why clients visit these webcam models. We hear excerpts of interviews that focus on how the girls see their clients. It focuses on why the clients come online besides the obvious sexual needs; for friendship, connection, to blow off steam, to ask for advice, and so on. Many of the men visiting have their specific issues and requests. Some of them don't like to show themselves because they have body-issues, they contact the webcam models because they think that it's the only way for them to talk to pretty girls. Others have problems with their girlfriends and wives and just want some advice.

*[quote on giving advice about partners]*



Some of the subjects described in the different anecdotes appear on screen in the form of a chat-box pop-up.

## chapter ii: doing

The image cuts to an empty peep show room. The camera takes the position of the performer, the stage slowly rotating it's axis. The camera is focussed on the reflection of the different one way mirrors.

*[quote on fetish]*

Through hearing the models reflect on their conversations, what clients are looking for online sexually. Sometimes this is to perform or talk about fantasies and fetishes which they can't express with their partners. Sometimes it is because they do not have anyone to explore them with.

*[[ quote handcream fetish]]*

Rendered 3D images of these different objects appear on screen; hand-cream, high heels, a rope. In the same way the stage was rotating, these images rotate on the screen.

## chapter iii: being

The image cuts to another room. Slowly the camera makes it's way through the room. Different objects are placed in the room. These objects are now tactile and the camera slowly moves past the couple objects scattered around the room.

In the chapter Being the film will focus on when Typing and Doing become Being. When the performance of a connection, becomes an actual connection. I have talked a lot with different models about the 'friendship' they create online. One that is in many cases mutual. Sometimes even without the transactional aspect. These friendships are very important to the models. They come online hoping that they bump into some of their friends. Some of them speak of love, even if they have a boyfriend in 'real life'. These friendships sometimes consist of speaking to each other on a daily basis for years, sharing interest, thoughts, emotions. For the models it is very hard if one of their friends then disappears.

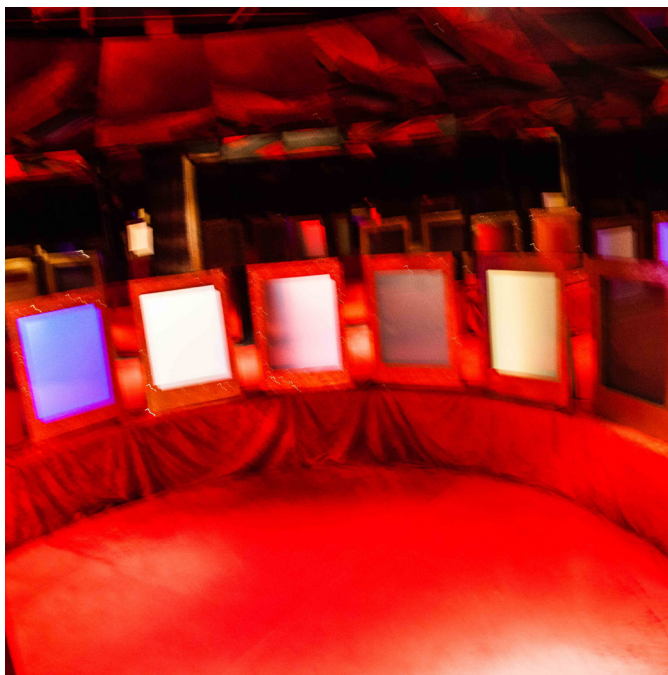


Photo by Peter Bracke

*"I have a member, he followed me from the old studio. He came and found me here. We are friends. He knows everything I'm doing and what my plans are, and everything started so silly. [...] He told me funny story, and I gave him my opinion. He was very happy that I listened to him."* Interview with Avery (feb 2019)

Slowly the camera moves out of the room, but instead of coming back to the film-set, the images slowly moves back into a hallway, revealing that the image of the room was not a constructed one, but one of a personal space in a house.

## vi. the image

Visually the film will shift between a build (fictional)film set of a bed-room and 3d images of objects, , a peepshow environment and footage of a real bedroom. This will give you the idea that there is no real sense of 'reality' as everything is mediated through different spaces.

The different settings will act as a metaphor for the performed reality. These different elements will be introduced in different ways.

### places

There are a couple different places represented in the movie. A lot of webcam studios in eastern Europe have build rooms, ones that have not a distinct personal touch to it. All that is left in these images is the 'decor'. The empty promises of luxury. Looking at these images you can clearly imagine the performer using the

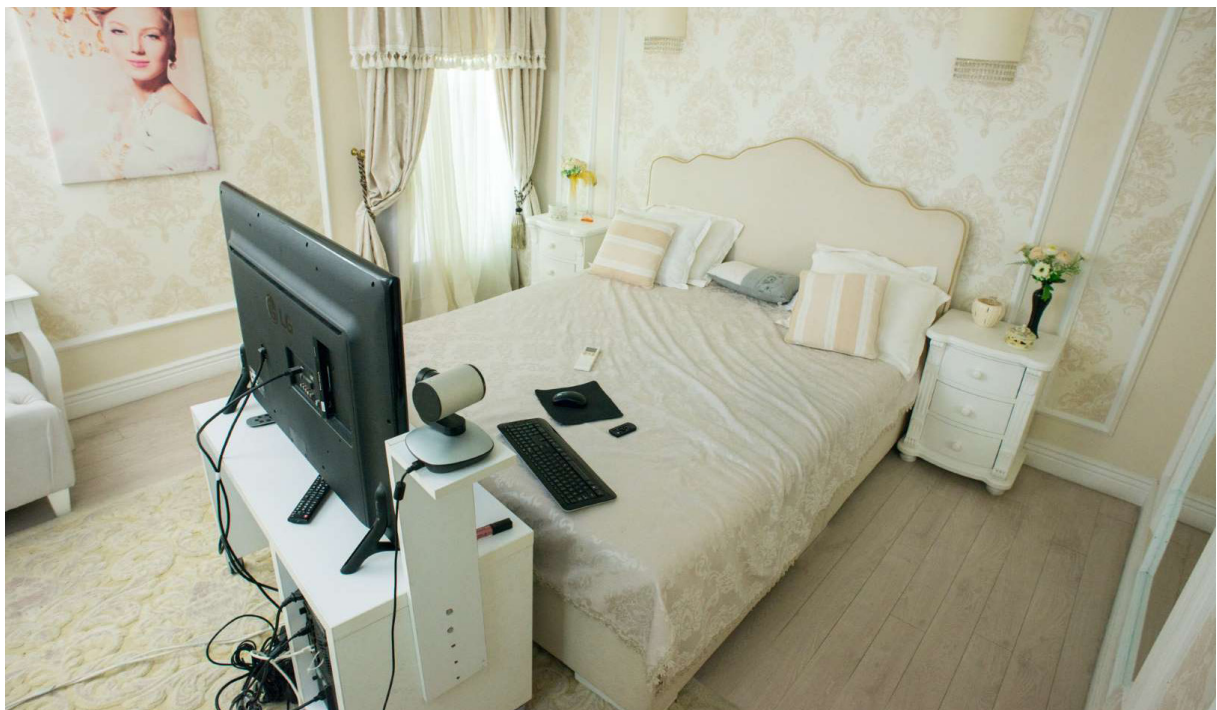


Photo from Best Studio, taken by VICE





Video stills from EARTHQUAKES, a film by Maya Watanabe, example of how micro and macro work to reveal backstage

space, the webcam endlessly prying into the room. They resemble an echo of what happens there, and it just takes place in your imagination. On the other hand they show the 'back-stage', the cables and monitors, which are not possible to hide from the camera. This room will be rebuilt in a filmset. Revealing it is a filmset will play with the idea of performance. By reconstructing these rooms and showing these stages/sets on micro and macro level it creates different layers reflecting on the idea of performance as well as the gaze.

Performers broadcast their shows from different 'themed' rooms, set-up in a studio-like way with lights, a camera and a computer. This could be from home or from within a webcam studio.

Another place where we will film is a peep-show booth. These rooms are a precursor to the profession of webcamming. Before the internet, they were thriving. Due to the internet they slowly faded away. The last in use peepshow booth closed in 2015.



Peepshow booth in San Francisco

*“There are a few periods when you have an empty site and nobody comes [private] and you have to be smiling and dancing and teasing and you have to stay in free chat and wait for someone who saves you. That’s the hardest part.”* From an interview with Isabel (feb 2019)

## objects

3D rendered image of high-heels



The film is set in the decor of projected fantasies. Fantasies that sometimes are in stark contrast with the blunt, almost banal, reality. In the conversations a lot of the time certain subjects and objects are introduced. These can be fetishised objects, like cigarette’s and high heels, that are used in playing fantasies. The constructed 3d objects work as an analogy for the construction of fantasies online.

Other objects are used to describe friendships and connection the models make through talking about these particular objects. In the film these objects will appear in the spaces, as part of the set.

*“We met each-other in December. And in a few months we got to have a very strong connection. We are seeing each-other almost every day. We talked one time about coffee; he asked me how I drink my coffee. Then he told me he was in Indonesia, and he sent me pictures of machines for coffee. It was interesting. It’s almost like in real.. I feel something.”*

From an interview with Ewana (Feb 2019)



## spaces

Since the sky is not fixed to a place, it is also used to represent space. To give some contrast between inside and outside, and to break the narrative at certain points, there will be images of the sky. Also the use of chat-windows and images in pop-up computer-windows will be part of the aesthetics. Through these chat-windows elements of the conversation that the girls describe pop-up. These will act as a translation of the digital, the space that creates the connections described by the models.

Through using different forms of mediation; documentary, fiction and animation, we try and touch upon a deeper layer that is present in the film; that the internet - and within that webcamming - is a place that is both real and unreal, both preformed and experienced, through typing, doing and being.



example as metaphor for space

## Interview excerpts [still transcribing]

These are excerpts from an interview I did with Jessica (29) through skype. Jessica has been working as a cam-girl since she was 21. She started as a studio model and now works from her home in Romania.

“[...] He was like 15 years older than me, but he was nice and polite and romantic. [...] He was jealous, he didn't understand that it's my job [...] to compliment other people. Because, why do they come here? Because they are frustrated, they have enough to fight with their wives or have their own problems. Here they need here a smile, they need a compliment. [...] They come here to feel appreciated, to feel good. But he didn't understand that. He thought, maybe I'm not loyal to him. But loyalty is a hard word in the virtual space, almost impossible so to say. I mean, loyalty is in the heart, not in the words you share with the clients.”

“This other man, [...] He was so romantic, he came to see me for 2 years almost all the time, on the same hour. Daily, just one day he couldn't come. And he stayed for like half an hour. He sent me, everyday, two or three poems, that he wrote for me, haha. [...] So this man, he didn't even insist to meet me in real... I mean I think he was aware it was just the virtual stuff. He stayed anonymous. Not everyone shows themselves. I respect that. Maybe he wanted his identity to stay secret”

“They [clients that act like slaves] should learn to respect themselves, they shouldn't be paying girls just to laugh of them [...] I mean I would like to help them, I would like to teach them to accept themselves how they are and to appreciate themselves. [...] I had one client, he was addicted to blackmail. He told me that he had lost two houses, his car, two jobs. Just because he paid some mistresses, very expensive girls, not me! He came to me just to cry and complain.” Interview with Jessica (Jan 2019)

I have recorded 6 audio-interviews with webcam models in Bucharest at Best Studios. These interviews are now in the process of being transcribed.